



Recognizing Symptoms of Dementia

The Brown family reunion was always an event everyone looked forward to - visits, games, stories and favorite foods. On the top of the list was everyone's favorite tradition - Grandma's Lemon Coconut Cake. This year, however, Grandma's cake tasted a little on the salty side, perhaps a ½ cupful of salty.

Though the family was disappointed over the cake, of more concern was Grandma's confusion with the recipe and her similar confusion about the loved ones around her. Could something be wrong with grandma's mental state?

One might say that for an elder person a little forgetfulness or confusion is normal, but when do you know if there is a serious problem, such as dementia? Some common symptoms of dementia are listed below. Not everyone who has dementia will experience all of these symptoms.

- **Recent memory loss.** All of us forget things for a while and then remember them later. People who have dementia often forget things, but they never remember them. They might ask you the same question over and over, each time forgetting that you've already given them the answer. They won't even remember that they already asked the question.
- **Difficulty performing familiar tasks.** People who have dementia might cook a meal but forget to serve it. They might even forget that they cooked it.
- **Problems with language.** People who have dementia may forget simple words or use the wrong words. This makes it hard to understand what they want.
- **Time and place disorientation.** People who have dementia may get lost on their own street. They may forget how they got to a certain place and how to get back home.
- **Poor judgment.** Even a person who doesn't have dementia might get distracted. But people who have dementia can forget simple things, like forgetting to put on a coat before going out in cold weather.
- **Problems with abstract thinking.** Anybody might have trouble balancing a checkbook, but people who have dementia may forget what the numbers are and what has to be done with them.
- **Misplacing things.** People who have dementia may put things in the wrong places. They might put an iron in the freezer or a wristwatch in the sugar bowl. Then they can't find these things later.

- **Changes in mood.** Everyone is moody at times, but people who have dementia may have fast mood swings, going from calm to tears to anger in a few minutes.
- **Personality changes.** People who have dementia may have drastic changes in personality. They might become irritable, suspicious or fearful.
- **Loss of initiative.** People who have dementia may become passive. They might not want to go places or see other people.

Dementia is caused by change or destruction of brain cells. Often this change is a result of small strokes or blockage of blood cells, severe hypothyroidism or Alzheimer's disease. There is a continuous decline in ability to perform normal daily activities. Personal care including dressing, bathing, preparing meals and even eating a meal eventually becomes impossible.

What can family members do if they suspect dementia? An appointment with the doctor is the first step to take. Depending on the cause and severity of the problem there are some medications that may help slow the process.

In the beginning, family members often find part-time caregivers – helping to remember daily activities or meals. As dementia progresses, caregiving demands often require 24 hour care. Night and day become confused and normal routines of sleeping, eating and functioning become more difficult. The demented person feels frustrated and may lash out in anger or fear. It is not uncommon for a child or spouse to quickly become overwhelmed and discouraged.

Family gatherings provide an excellent opportunity to discuss caregiving plans and whole family support. It is most helpful if everyone in the family is united.

The first step to holding a family meeting, and perhaps the most difficult one, is to get all interested persons together in one place at one time. If it's a family gathering, perhaps a birthday, an anniversary or another special event could be used as a way to get all to meet.

The end of the meeting should consist of asking everyone present to make his or her commitment to support the plan. This might just simply be moral support and agreement to abide by the provisions or it is hoped that those attending will volunteer to do something constructive. This might mean commitments to providing care, transportation, financial support, making legal arrangements or some other tangible support

Professional home care services are an option to help families in the home. Caregivers are trained and skilled to help with dementia patients. Don't forget care facilities as well. It may be the best loving care a family member can give is to place their loved one in a facility where that person is safely monitored and

cared for.